The Beginnings of Tolerance
June 19, 2011

John Buchanan, Pastor
Fourth Presbyterian Church

Psalm 8
Acts 5:33–39

"If this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them."
Acts 5: 38–39 (NRSV)

If people from all races and cultures are equally created in the divine image, and if God's desire is that all live in a world community marked by justice, freedom, and peace, then there must be room for a positive appreciation of the diversity of human religious as well as cultural life.

Cynthia M. Campbell
A Multitude of Blessings: A Christian Approach to Religious Diversity

We are here this morning to be together in your presence. To worship you, to thank you for all your gifts, and to hear the word you have for us today. Startle us with your truth, truth lived in the world in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

I'm thinking today about my father, who died much too early but who loved me and taught me many important things—tolerance, for instance.

When I was six or seven years old, I went along with my neighbor chums to a weekly gathering in the home of a kind, elderly woman, Miss Hurst. The name of the gathering was the Good News Club. But at the first meeting it became, for me, a Bad News Club.

A few years earlier we lived on the third floor of a walk-up apartment building. On the second floor lived Mrs. Alexander—Mrs. A we called her—

and her two high-school-aged daughters, Eileen and Harriet, my first babysitters. They were Jewish.

My parents liked Mrs. A a lot, and she and I became great friends. I visited her regularly. When I was three or four, she allowed me to help with the ironing, and I liked that so much I asked for an ironing board for Christmas (and got it—which is way too much information). And she always had a plate of chocolate chip cookies. I loved Mrs. A.

Well, at the first meeting of the Good News Club, Miss Hurst announced some bad news. Mrs. A was going to hell because she was Jewish and didn't believe in Jesus. Miss Hurst had more bad news: people who smoked and drank were also in big trouble with God—so there went my parents as well. They believed in Jesus, so maybe they could slip in. But it was Mrs. A in hell that bothered me.

So I asked my parents, "Is it true that Mrs. A is going to hell?" They explained at dinner, "No, Mrs. A isn't going to hell. Can you even imagine such a thing?" I said, "No, I couldn't imagine Mrs. A in hell."

Dad and Mother assured me that God loves everyone—us and Mrs. A and Eileen and Harriet. They did not include Miss Hurst, although they should have, and they told me I would not be going to Good News Club any longer.

A favorite college professor told a class I was taking that among the most important words and best ideas in all of history are these: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." It's the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, and it was passed on March 4, 1789, just as we were getting started.

In the entire history of human ideas, tolerance of religious difference is among the most important. That all are welcome, that each has the right to believe whatever their conscience tells them is true, that no one has the right to force anyone to believe anything is generally regarded as the one absolutely necessary guarantee to enable a robust and internally peaceful experiment in republican democracy. The people who came here and fought for and then established this experiment had personal experience with religious intolerance. It was only two centuries earlier that English Catholics and Protestants, depending on who was the monarch, were arresting one another, sentencing each other to the Tower, chopping off

heads and burning people at the stake. The people who wrote the Bill of Rights remembered the time not long before, when Catholic and Protestant armies fought each other for one hundred years, each fighting, dying, and killing in the name of Christ. Mary of the people who came here from Europe came to escape that violence and the mentality that inspired and rationalized it.

Tolerance: Christians believe we owe one another more than tolerance, but it is the one thing absolutely essential for our nation and for the future of the world. And although the idea is associated with the Enlightenment, it actually emerges in an incident that happened early in our own Christian history, and it involved a rabbi, a member of the high court or council in Jerusalem, a man who should be one of our saints. His name is Gamaliel.

The followers of Jesus are still in Jerusalem in the weeks following his arrest, trial, crucifixion, and resurrection. For seven weeks they remained in hiding for fear that to be identified with Jesus might get them arrested, punished, perhaps crucified. Then on the day of Pentecost, something happened to them. They came out from hiding and began to speak publically. As their Lord instructed, they were healing the sick and lame, paying a lot of attention to the marginal, outcast, poor people. Crowds were gathering wherever they went—the curious, the weak and vulnerable. At every opportunity they talked about Jesus, that he was God's Son, the promised Messiah. The religious and political authorities, the same ones who had conspired to get rid of Jesus, were not pleased with what was happening. So they arrested Peter and a few others, ordered them to cease speaking about Jesus. Peter's response was that they had to obey God, not any human authority. That struck a nerve. The implication was that the authorities themselves were not obeying God and so, as always happens under those circumstances, the authorities became angry—very angry. They were discussing doing whatever they needed to do to silence these troublemakers, including stoning them, executing them. Just then, one of the most respected and revered members of the council spoke up. His name was Gamaliel. He was wise; everyone knew him and listened when he spoke.

"Slow down. Think again. . . . Consider carefully what you propose to do with these men." And then these important words: "Let them alone: if their plan or undertaking is of a human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you

will not be able to overthrow them. In that case, you may even be fighting against God."

Think of that! You don't have to stamp out ideas you don't like. You don't have to crush ideologies and movements that you regard as wrong and dangerous. Think of the implications of what that wise and noble rabbi said that day. "We may not have all the truth here. Our religion is about the one God and was given to us by the one God. But maybe, just maybe there is more truth, truth bigger and beyond our religion. Ideas may be worth dying for. But no idea is worth killing for." It is the tiny seed of tolerance, and it is one of the best ideas anyone ever had.

The story of religious intolerance is sad and tragic. The late Shirley Guthrie, Professor of Theology at Columbia Theological Seminary in Atlanta, wrote in his book *Always Being Reformed,*

> The results are always the same. First those who are sure their interpretation of the gospel is the correct (and only) one try to "help" others understand and accept their true religion, true morality, true vision of a just and political and social order. If that does not work, then in one form or another, violent or nonviolent, come the crusades, the inquisitions, religious wars, and colonial or economic or cultural imperialism that tries to force everyone to live this or that version of true Christianity. (p. 63)

Sadly, we Christians, whose religion was born in the midst of intolerance and then persecution, in the final analysis are no less guilty historically than anyone else. Cynthia Campbell, recently retired President of McCormick Theological Seminary and frequent preacher from this pulpit, wrote an important and helpful book, *A Multitude of Blessings: A Christian Approach to Religious Diversity*. She observes that when Christian certainty that our ideas, our truth, our church is the only one, true religion—when that religious certainty is combined with political and military power, tragedy always follows. Christian Europe, Cynthia observed, turned on its Jewish population, demeaning, ghettoizing, persecuting, in a way that laid the foundation for the twentieth-century Nazi attempt to eliminate Jews altogether. In 1492, as Ferdinand and Isabella were financing and commissioning Christopher Columbus's exploratory voyage, they were also issuing an edict that all Jews and Muslims in Spain could either convert to Christianity or be expelled. Even those who chose conversion were not

trusted. The Spanish Inquisition hounded, investigated, tortured, and executed thousands.

When diversity in thinking and practicing began to emerge within Christianity, proponents of different views regarded one another as mortal enemies, members of another religion, enemies of the true faith, and therefore enemies of God. When not physically fighting, we're hurling epithets, insults at one another. "Apostate!" "Heretical!" are two favorites.

Is there no way out of this tragic story? Are we condemned to permanent religious animosity and hostility, "our way is the only way, and the only way you and I will ever reconcile and live in peace is for you to understand the error of your ways and believe what I believe and become what I am"?

There are things to do about it, and there is an alternate way to think about religious diversity, about other religions and people of other faiths.

On Tuesday of the week I planned a sermon on tolerance, the *New York Times* published a report, "An Effort to Foster Tolerance in Religion." It was about Chicagoan Eboo Patel, whom I'm proud to call a friend, and the organization he founded, the Interfaith Youth Core. The problem Eboo wants to address is increased religious diversity causing increased religious conflict, too often driven by religious extremists. He says, "If Muslim radicals and extremists of other religious traditions are recruiting young people, then those who believe in religious tolerance should also be enlisting the youth." So Eboo, a Rhodes Scholar with his doctorate in the sociology of religion from Oxford, started a program here in Chicago to bring together young people from differing faith traditions not only to talk and get acquainted, but to work and serve together. His dream is to have a project on every college and university campus, and he's making impressive progress. He is a Muslim, and his vision for interfaith relationships based on humanitarian service came from visiting his grandmother in Mumbai and seeing how she, a very modest woman and devout Muslim, opened her home and took in homeless women and on realizing that compassion and caring for one another are deep values in all the great world religions.

Efforts like that deserve recognition and support. And we can change our thinking about this whole matter of religious certainty, religious exclusiveness that justifies the marginalization and persecution of the other.

Exclusiveness says that our way is the only way, our truth the only truth, our religion, therefore, the one true religion. Christian exclusiveness is traditional, orthodox, and many, perhaps most, Christians believe it. There are biblical texts that reinforce it. Belief in Jesus Christ, and membership in the Christian church are the way to salvation, the only way, period.

The problem with Christian exclusivity, Cynthia Campbell observes, is that it conflicts with other things we believe about God: that God created every human being in God's image; that God loves every human being unconditionally; that God's mercy endures forever. "Why?" Cynthia asks, "would a God in whose image all people were created, a God the Bible says loves all of creation, devise a plane of salvation that would automatically exclude most of the human beings who ever have lived?" There is, however, another way to think about God. It's also in the Bible, with plenty of supportive texts. In the Psalter, God is Lord of all nations, all people, cultures, races, religions. The prophet Isaiah had a universal vision of all the nations coming to the mountain of God. St. Paul believed that God was reconciling the whole world, reconciling all things. And Jesus himself said, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold."

There is an alternate way of thinking: that religious diversity is part of God's providential plan and that what God wants from us, from Christian followers of God's Son, is not only tolerance, but respect for those of other faith traditions and understanding and respect for their faith.

It means holding together two ideas at the same time: that God's love is universal and unconditional and that Jesus Christ is the full expression of that love. But do you have to say the right words, sign on the dotted line, join the right church? I'm not as sure about that anymore. Given all the trouble we've made for one another, for other people and for God, I am more and more sure that no church has a monopoly on truth, no church has the right to claim exclusiveness, no church has the right to claim the total approval of God.

Given the historic tragedy that way of thinking has caused, I am sure that that is not what God wants; that what God wants from every human being is acknowledgment that the human race is one family with a wonderful diversity of races and colors and customs and languages and music and poetry and religion, one family of humankind, created and sustained by God. I am sure that what God wants is not a relatively tiny minority claiming

superiority over all the rest. Baptists over Lutherans, Catholics over Protestants, Protestants over Catholics, Christians over Jews, Jews and Christians over Muslims, Muslims over Hindus and Christians and Jews. I am sure that what God wants for all of us is gratitude and respect and care for one another.

Christianity is my faith. Presbyterian Christianity is my religion, spiritual home. I have lived my life and will continue to live it as one who fell in love with Jesus years ago and has been fascinated and compelled by him ever since. I believe Jesus is Truth incarnate. And I also have a deepening appreciation for the mystery of God, the God beyond anything I can see or understand. I have a deeper understanding of what St. Paul meant when he said that now we see through a glass darkly, incompletely, partially. And I have a deepening trust that one day I, all of us, will see clearly, face to face. In the meantime, I am grateful to leave to a just and loving God the final accounting for myself and for every human being.

I have in my file an article from the *Christian Century* by the late Ronald Goetz, who for years was the Niebuhr Distinguished Professor of Theology and Ethics at Elmhurst College. Goetz found himself in a predicament common among clergy. He was invited by two friends of his to preach at the funeral of their father, a man who was a lifelong confirmed atheist. The problem is, what to say that does not contradict Christian beliefs or violate the man's honest atheism?

Goetz produced a small masterpiece. He said he would honor his friends' father by not violating or even arguing with his atheism. He observed that the father's life had been full of suffering and abuse and that believers should never simply dismiss the "protest atheism" of those who cannot square the idea of a loving God with the reality of human suffering.

He said these words that I have kept and treasured and on occasion used:

> I would hope that grace, which God intends for the salvation of all humanity, is not so fragile that it cannot stand up to human unbelief. Surely the God who dwelt among us in the person of Jesus Christ is both too powerful and too gracious to take our rebellious rejections for final answers. . . . Surely the God who out of love has made all things . . . could never conclude that there is no other choice but to damn all but a chosen few to eternal rejection.

“No,” Professor Goetz concluded, “God, in God’s freedom, has left open countless avenues to God’s grace.”

Tolerance, in the history of human ideas, is one of the best and perhaps the most important. It is absolutely necessary for the future of our wonderfully diverse country and world and for Christians, a response to a God of amazing grace, a God who has found a way to love us, accept us, bless us, whose mercy endures forever, and from whose love nothing will ever separate us.

Amen.